

The Alaskan Way Viaduct & Seawall Replacement Project

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U.S. Department of Transportation
Federal Highway Administration



Washington State
Department of Transportation



City of Seattle

Frequently Asked Questions

For More Information:

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1 Why do the Alaskan Way Viaduct and Seawall have to be replaced?

The 53-year-old Alaskan Way Viaduct and Seawall are past their design lives, and repairs can no longer extend their usability. There is a one in twenty chance that the Viaduct will be significantly damaged in the next earthquake. The Nisqually Earthquake woke us up to this fact and showed that the Seawall is vulnerable as well. While the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) and the City of Seattle continue to maintain and repair the two structures, it is clear that a retrofit is not a long-term solution.

2 Why is the tunnel the preferred alternative for replacing the Viaduct and Seawall? Is the rebuild still being considered?

After three years of study and deliberation, the tunnel was chosen as the preferred alternative in December 2004 because it is a combination of solutions. The tunnel:

- Takes advantage of a 100-year opportunity to reconnect downtown with Elliott Bay and creates a new regional civic space for generations to enjoy.
- Maintains a critical transportation corridor for commuters and freight and is an important alternative to I-5 through Seattle and downtown.

- Is a two-for-one solution: the west wall of the tunnel replaces a portion of the aging and deteriorating Seawall.

The rebuild remains the contingency plan and is being carried forward through the environmental review process.

3 What is the 'core tunnel'?

The 'core tunnel' plan takes a phased approach to construction in order to fix the critical sections of the project corridor first with the available funding. The critical section includes the south end and central waterfront portions of the corridor, which are at the greatest risk of incurring serious damage in another earthquake.

4 How will the project be funded?

The project currently has \$2.45 billion in-hand, and with funds likely to come in this year, the total will rise to \$3.15 billion, enough to reach the lower cost range for the core tunnel. With any large-scale project, funding comes in stages. Future funding needed to complete the full tunnel project could come from a variety of sources, including the City of Seattle, federal funding cycles and local improvement districts.

5 Are the cost estimates for this project reasonable?

WSDOT has a rigorous process of determining cost and schedule estimates that accounts for uncertainties and risks that might otherwise cause project costs to rise over time. The project's engineers sit down with national experts in construction and risk assessment to determine accurate cost estimates by pinpointing risks and uncertainties such as inflation, material costs, and schedule delays. Then they repeat the process each year until construction begins. For the Viaduct project, cost estimates have been completed each year since 2002. Over the life of the project, this process allows the project team to focus on opportunities to reduce those risks that are the highest drivers of cost.

6 How will the project choose a construction approach?

The three lead agencies will weigh the trade-offs of various construction options to strike a balance of construction time, cost, and traffic disruptions. Public input about construction helps the project team develop an approach that reflects reasonable priorities.

7 Is there a plan for the surface above the tunnel?

The City of Seattle's Central Waterfront Plan effort will develop a plan for the waterfront area above the tunnel, and an extensive public involvement program is underway. The plan will determine the future of the waterfront after the tunnel is constructed. Instead of the rumbling noise of cars overhead, residents and visitors will be able to enjoy the waterfront unobstructed by a large, elevated freeway. The area will be dedicated to transportation and public space, not sold off to private developers.

8 How will the environment be affected with the tunnel?

Building the tunnel would result in several positive impacts for the surrounding environment. With the Viaduct gone, views to and from the waterfront will be opened up for the first time since the early 1950's. The tunnel is expected to reduce noise levels by up to 12 decibels in the central waterfront compared to today, also making the area more pleasant for pedestrians, residents, and nearby businesses. Stormwater from the tunnel will be treated before being discharged, so it will reduce the discharge of untreated stormwater and sewage into Elliott Bay.

9 Is the tunnel safe in an earthquake?

In the case of an earthquake, a tunnel is just as safe as a rebuilt Viaduct. In fact, project engineers say they would prefer to be in a tunnel because the tunnel will move with the earth. The U.S. leads the world in advanced life-safety systems for tunnels, including ventilation, fire suppression and lighting systems. WSDOT already operates these systems in the two I-90 tunnels.

10 What will be included in the supplemental draft Environmental Impact Statement?

The supplemental draft EIS will update the tunnel and rebuild alternatives, including proposals for a lowered Aurora Avenue, a Victor Steinbrueck Park lid, and potentially building SR 99 under Elliott Avenue and Western Avenue. The supplemental draft EIS will also provide estimates on construction closure durations, which neighborhoods will likely be affected and for how long, and the type of impact that can be expected during construction, such as noise, access, and lighting.

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